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Viewing cable 06BOGOTA11488, COLMIL: JTF-O ONTO A MORE AGGRESSIVE FOOTING

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06BOGOTA11488	2006-12-27 19:01	2011-08-30 01:44	SECRET	Embassy Bogota

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S E C R E T BOGOTA 011488

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/18/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [MARR](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: COLMIL: JTF-O ONTO A MORE AGGRESSIVE FOOTING

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood

Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (S) In the Colombian military's main focus area against the FARC, the incoming commander is planning two changes to improve results. First, he will spread battalion formations to widen their area of control and increase chances of enemy contact. Second, he will create new companies dedicated to killing specific FARC leaders. Both plans require a shift to smaller sized units, farther from bases and with rapid reaction capability. The strategies hold real potential to boost military impact against FARC guerrilla tactics, but they are riskier to troops and dependent on extra training, mobility, and political will to endure casualties. End Summary.

Mission 40% Met; Adjustments Now Needed

¶2. (C) EmbassyMilgroup met on December 14 with the new commander of Joint Task Force Omega (JTF-O), General Alejandro Navas, replacing General Gilberto Rocha who was promoted to the General Staff. The Omega area -- comprising portions of Meta, Caqueta, and Guaviare departments -- is a region of traditional FARC concentration, where some of its leaders hide out. It is the main focus of the Plan Patriota campaign. The force's eight Army mobile brigades, one Navy riverine element, and four Air Force helicopters cover 30,000 square miles, which Navas noted is 3.5 times the area of El Salvador. With 14,500 troops, JTF-O has reduced local FARC forces by an estimated 40% in the last two years; 1,900 terrorists have been killed, captured, or demobilized. Navas said his goal was to eliminate 80-90% of the enemy in the area in the next two years.

¶3. (S) Achieving that objective will require the Colombian Army to change from its traditional deployment at battalion scale. Army concentration makes it easy for the FARC to track its movements (via observation, signals interception, or infiltration) while keeping its own forces at a safe distance and moving its leaders out of danger. Navas sketched a diagram of how the FARC surrounds its leaders with rings of protective forces. As a result, the Army comes into contact with minor elements of outer scouts and sentries. To penetrate those rings, the Army must move in units that are smaller and nimbler than battalions.

Widening Battalions' Reach

¶4. (S) As the former commander of JTF-O's rapid response force, Navas knows the theater and comes to JTF-O command with his own ideas on counter guerrilla combat. The first of these is a method he calls the "active neutralization of critical areas," involving an expanded layout of forces with platoons sent further afield to rotate around the main camp. Widening each battalion's radius of operations will expand its footprint and multiply offensive contact with the guerrillas. As seen in several costly encounters for the military with the FARC in 2006, soldiers operating at platoon scale will be more exposed to enemy attacks, and the FARC will seek to exploit this vulnerability.

New HVT-Focused Companies

¶5. (S) Navas' second initiative is the creation of new companies to target FARC leaders. President Uribe has made this a priority, but the military has failed to achieve results due to slow response times and poor operational security. In Navas' plan, each of JTF-O's eight brigades will form a "reconnaissance and destruction" company of

128-152 men, each to operate against a named FARC leader. The goal is to move rapidly in response to timely intelligence and to insert within 10 km of the target with greater operational security. In practice mobility depends on availability of scarce air assets. Company sized units also cannot move with complete stealth. Milgroupassesses that FARC Secretariat members may remain the domain of more nimble special forces, while the new units may achieve results against mid-level leaders.

¶6. (S) The plan's success relies on factors which the U.S. can help support. Navas is expecting to increase his number of helicopters from four to six, taking two of eight Black Hawks arriving soon. Communications are critical, and the U.S. has supplied a radio network to enable the new missions. Friendly fire is a risk among converging small units, especially during night operations. Navas has also pushed for more timely intelligence from Bogota headquarters, as well as for direct online access to data through the U.S.-built intelligence communications computer system. The general has initiated hiring of demobilized guerrillas to be integrated into the companies. The U.S. will play an essential role in the training of the new units; the Milgroup's training teams are now designing a specialized one-month program to kick off in February 2007.

Rewards vs. Risks?

¶7. (C) Embassy has long counseled the COLMIL to adapt to FARC irregular warfare. Smaller units made up of the very best soldiers could move more rapidly and be sequestered for operational security. Navas' plans could measurably increase effectiveness if well implemented. However, more dispersed deployment also implies greater exposure of troops to enemy fire, without the mobility and extensive backup called for in U.S. doctrine. These strategies depend on quick reaction, solid communications and coordination, and air mobility. It remains to be seen whether Navas can summon the resources to effect these changes and the political cover to sustain them, how the FARC will exploit any vulnerabilities, and how many casualties the COLMIL will suffer in exchange for gaining ground. We will do what we can to support this tactical shift.

WOOD